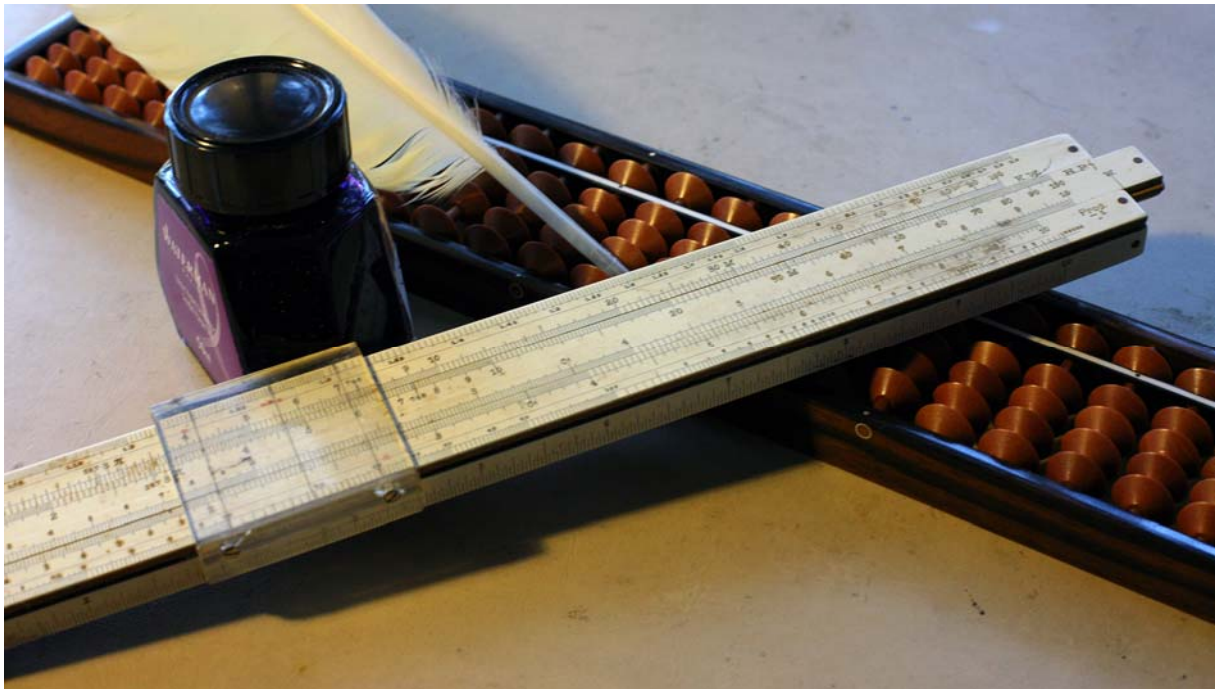


From the Kitchen

1 August 2016



They've moved everything again. I mean, how could they, without warning me? I came in this morning and my normal cubicle was gone. Cubicle 8.1. Why 8.1? Don't know. I used to be in 7, but they 'upgraded' me.

Actually, some time ago I used to have my own little office with a nice vista. I felt I was in control and could get on with my work, although the window did distract me.

I find the supervisor and she tells me that "change is good", that "it gives a new perspective on life". She points to a cubicle at the other side of the open plan office space. "That's your new workspace there, number 10. It should lead to better productivity."

I make my way over to it. There are piles of folders and files along the left, leaning against the partition. All my working tools, like clock and calculator and pens and ruler, are against another partition. Straight ahead is a handwritten sign: "Daan, Welcome".

I look over my shoulder. Who wrote this? Am I being watched? Am I paranoid? Yes to that last question.

I put my briefcase under the desktop. I look at the files. I pick a few up. They've been reorganised and relabelled – not the way I left them in cubicle 8.1. It takes me hours to get them all the way they *should* be. I believe in order and routine; that way I can get on with my work without hunting for things.

I reach for my pen. Empty space. I look up. Where my pen should be is ... nothing. I look at the pile of stuff on the right. I riffle through it. Ah, there it is.

I carefully put everything in its correct place on the desktop: fountain pen, HB pencil, 2B pencil, yellow highlighter, green highlighter, sharpener, eraser, ruler, set square, notebook, calculator.

Calculator! That's not *my* calculator! I examine it. Larger, longer display, buttons a different colour. I press ON and it talks to me in a nasal twang: "Welcome Daan. Thank you for choosing to use me." I look over my shoulder again. To test it, I press '2' and ' $\sqrt{\quad}$ '. It

speaks again: “The answer is 1-point-4-1-4-2-1-3-5-6-2-3-7... do you want more figures, Daan?” I press OFF.

I open the drawer under the desktop and see that there is an odd selection of paper – not the paper that I usually have there. I pick one sheet at random. With the ruler and the 2B pencil I draw a line. I go to mark off increments of 4 picas. I stare. The ruler is graduated in mm. I turn it over – inches. Useless to me!

I snap the ruler and throw it into the recycle bin next to my chair. I reach for my briefcase. I take out my abacus, slide rule, quill and bottle of ink. I place them on my desk and sigh. I close my eyes.

I dream.

The room is dingy. Dust motes drift in the few shafts of light coming through the old windows. The huge ledger open in front of me on the high, sloping desk is swimming with numbers. At the top of the page is an exhortation: ‘Strive to excel’. There are empty columns to be filled. I reach for my slide rule and make a number of calculations, then enter them in the ledger. I repeat this process over and over. If only there were some way to have all these calculations done without this laborious, repetitions process. If Stephenson could adapt one of his steam engines to do this. I dream within my dream. I see the ledger magically fill up without my intervention. If only ...

“Spijer! You’re daydreaming again!” It’s the supervisor. “Get on with your work.”

I look at the ‘ancient’ tools on my desk. What am I thinking? They’re just playthings. I get up and walk to the stationery department to get a new pica ruler. When I return to my cubicle, there is a blue sheet covering it completely.

The supervisor appears again. “You’re due for an upgrade. Shouldn’t take long. It’s about 30% done.”

“But I’ve just been upgraded.”

“Yes, but we should have moved you to cubicle 10 a year ago and this is the ‘anniversary’ upgrade. Should be much better.”

As I leave for a coffee, I turn and see a workman installing a CCTV camera above my desk.